

**The Good King:  
The American Presidency  
Since The Depression**

**Bruce Kuklick, Ph. D.**

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Bruce Kuklick was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1941 and received his bachelor's degree with honors from the University of Pennsylvania in 1963. He did post graduate work at Oxford University and earned his Ph. D. in American Civilization from the University of Pennsylvania in 1968.

From 1972 to present he has taught at the University of Pennsylvania. From 1979-80 he chaired their History Department. He has also taught at Yale University and was a Mellon Professor of the Humanities from 1987-1992.

Among his numerous academic awards are the Thouron Fellowship, 1963-64 at Oxford University, the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, 1964-65, The University and Harrison Fellowships, 1965-67, The Penfield Travelling Fellowship in Diplomatic History, 1967-68, the American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship, 1973, and the Guggenheim Fellowship, 1976-77. He was also a fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, California, 1978-79, and a Rockefeller Fellow in the Humanities. In 1989 he received the Lindback Award for distinguished teaching at the University of Pennsylvania.

He belongs to over ten professional associations including the American Historical Association and the Historical Society of the U.S. District Court. He has delivered lectures at many universities, professional association meetings, and at advanced seminars in the United States. He has directed an NEH Institute, and served on external academic review panels.

From 1969 to 1973 he was a consultant in Philosophy for Bobbs-Merrill Publishers, and from 1974 to 1983 he edited American Quarterly. He currently serves as a consulting editor for the Journal of the History of Ideas, and as an advisory editor for America: History and Life. His most recent publications are "The Emergence of the Humanities" South Atlantic Quarterly, 1990, and To Every Thing A Season: Shibe Park and Urban Philadelphia 1909-1976, Princeton, 1991. He is currently working on "Puritans in Babylon", a history of American archaeology in the Near East and the emergence of historical thought, 1870-1930.

## **Lecture One: Civic Personality and the Presidency**

- I. Roosevelt and Hoover were central presidents in American history.
  - A. FDR won four elections.
  - B. While Hoover was a disaster with the people, he was seen as one of the most competent administrators.
    1. He was elected to the presidency in 1928.
    2. Six months later, the stock market crashed marking the beginning of the Great Depression.
    3. Hoover became the first President systematically to use the federal government to try to resolve economic traumas.
- II. Hoover had a distinct civic personality.
  - A. Hoover was an intellectual. He wrote many books and made translations of a Latin text.
  - B. He was principled and tried to bring a certain set of consistent ideas to his political life. He believed in things such as voluntarism, efficiency in government, and individual initiative.
  - C. Hoover saw the presidency as more of an administrative job than a politicians job.
  - D. Hoover's views turned out to be disastrous in the Depression, and the evils of this time became personally associated with him.
  - E. Hoover went down to defeat in the most massive swing in the history of the party system.
- III. FDR also had a distinct civic personality.
  - A. FDR was an intellectual lightweight. He knew that the Americans view intellectuals with ambivalence.
  - B. He may be the least principled and scrupulous of American politicians.
  - C. He felt his job was for a showman because of the need for public persuasion, back slapping, and public presentation of ideas.
  - D. FDR made people realize that you must exude the characteristics of an intelligent, principled, thoughtful, and master statesman.
- III. FDR made a change from a presidency that appealed to a narrow group to a "mass presidency."
  - A. Roosevelt was crippled by polio. Although he wasn't able to walk on his own, most Americans knew nothing about his disability.
  - B. This was the triumph of appearances over realities which is now part of the modern presidency.



## Lecture Two: Lessons of the Master

- I. In 1936, FDR was reelected.
  - A. 1935 politics revolved around New Deal liberalism.
  - B. The NLRA (National Labor Relations Act) was the bill of rights for American workers, but was lukewarmly supported by FDR.
  - C. The WPA (Works Progress Administration) gave many Americans a sense that the government cared, however, it did not greatly assist in ending the Depression.
  - D. The Social Security Act was the first attempt to structure, on a national level, a series of old age pensions for Americans.
    1. This did not cover unemployed people.
    2. It works by taking money out of pay checks and charging the companies with the same amount.
  - E. The 1935 Tax Act symbolically raised tax brackets for upper levels.
- II. Tax policies of the New Deal were very controversial.
  - A. Only five percent of the people paid income taxes during the Hoover administration.
  - B. During the 1930's, tax money dramatically increased, especially on excise taxes, placing most of the burden on the poor.
  - C. During the 1940's, 75 percent of the people paid income taxes.
  - D. The 1935 Tax Act was not a "soak the rich" tax act, it was merely symbolic.
  - E. Critical analysis of these policies doesn't explain FDR's popularity.
- III. Why was FDR so popular?
  - A. In the early 1930's, FDR trades on the sense of community that was felt on the wake of the Depression.
  - B. He carried on the emphasis of the common man.
  - C. FDR was the master of "political interchange." He synthesized the words and deeds of the have nots with the well to do's.
  - D. He used the Republicans own strengths against them.
  - E. FDR echoed the grievances the people had with life in the 1930's.
  - F. He provided a coherent emotional structure for group and communal life in the U.S.
- IV. The media played a role in FDR's popularity.
  - A. Print and Radio do not convey reality.
  - B. They were selective in their coverage (FDR's healthy appearance).
  - C. The media shows what's on the surface -- an active, media friendly, and confident president -- but also what is essential.

## Lecture Three: Franklin Roosevelt's Legacy and the Divine King

- I. There are several interpretations of our national political history in the recent period.
  - A. Historians have adopted a "Rational Achievement Model" that has to do with how well the president passes certain policies that are considered to be beneficial to the country.
    1. The liberal school of thought is that FDR is the culmination of tolerant pragmatic politics, working for the good of the public, and seeing the federal government as essential to the good of the commonwealth.
    2. The conservative view was that FDR excessively used presidential power and was misguided, if not a villain.
    3. A left, revisionist view is that all presidents are conservative, are inadequate in dealing with American social problems, are belligerent in foreign policy, and are subservient to the ruling class.
  - B. How can this be a "rational" model if the experts disagree? The categories historians use to interpret American politics have not transcended the categories of American politics itself.
  - C. In recent political history, we have had much change and some chaos, but never progress.
    1. The function of political leadership is to make sense of this.
    2. FDR was able to do this in the 1930's and 1940's.
  - D. American politics is about the ability of political leadership to make people believe that the world is secure.
- II. Mass Social Psychology is important in American politics.
  - A. The way in which the electorate demands things from the leadership and the leadership's response can be determined from things like polls, political jokes and cartoons, and news editorials.
  - B. This can also be determined by the way people perceive the first family.
  - C. The founding fathers developed a system where authority is lodged in the people. This avoids allowing a small elite group to analyze in terms of their own political biases.

## Lecture Four: Harry Truman and the Cold War

- I. The politics and the diplomacy of the 1940's and early 1950's involves a case study of Harry Truman.
  - A. Truman's presidency was a story of great failure.
    1. When he took over, he had good will, but was still riding the coat tails of FDR.
    2. He loses this confidence quickly, and in 1946, the Republicans gain control of both houses of congress.
    3. There was a constant downward trajectory for his administration and he got as low as 25% in the polls.
    4. He received a jump in popularity in the summer of 1948 after declaration of the Korean war.
  - B. In the election of 1948, everyone felt Truman was a goner.
    1. He lost the left wing by running Henry Wallace.
    2. He lost the right wing when the Dixiecrats in the South ran their own candidate.
    3. Truman made a whistle stop tour and ended up defeating Dewey by a narrow margin.
- II. Domestic and foreign policy evolved during this time.
  - A. Republicans were able to get the Democrats on the defensive.
    1. They said FDR lured the U.S. in WWII.
    2. They said the Democrats wanted socialism in the U.S.
  - B. There were problems in foreign policy.
    1. The Soviet Union had emerged dominant in Eastern Europe.
    2. Western European economies were devastated by the war.
    3. Rather than stressing social and economic aspects of aid to Europe, the administration exaggerates the menace of militant communism in Eastern Europe.
  - C. Truman was able to maintain an unsteady balance.
    1. George Kennan says his ideas were misinterpreted.
    2. The Greco-Turkish aid program was the first installment of aid to all of Europe.
    3. The Marshall Plan saw to it that the administration put a socioeconomic rationale forward until it was unwise to do so.
    4. NATO was formed not as a military alliance, but to bring Western European nations together in an economic union.
    5. All of these items were triumphs for Truman, however, he lost control of the public information campaign.



## Lecture Five: The Korean Conflict and McCarthy

- I. Truman's 1948 victory was unfortunate for him.
  - A. The worst aspects of the Republican party were unleashed. They tried to discredit Truman and unseat the Democrats at all costs.
  - B. The administration suffers two more blows that undermined Truman's credibility: the fall of China, and the Hiss case.
  - C. McCarthy's speech in February, 1950 elevated the communist issue to the forefront of American life.
- II. The Korean War was a difficult time for Truman.
  - A. There were several factors in deciding to participate.
    1. The State Department wanted to defend South Korea.
    2. Korea was more important after the fall of China.
    3. Truman felt involvement would help maintain credibility.
    4. The administration thought it could get them money for Western Europe.
  - B. Far East military leader, Douglas MacArthur was key in bringing the plan to fruition.
    1. MacArthur was a right wing Republican and was irresponsible and unreliable.
    2. However, the administration was tied to MacArthur and had to go along with his desire to unify North and South Korea.
  - C. China enters the war after MacArthur crosses the 38th parallel.
  - D. In 1951, MacArthur is removed and the U.S. stays at the 38th parallel.
- III. Post-Korean War analysis is a mixed bag for Truman.
  - A. Historians believe MacArthur's removal was heroic, but too late.
    1. Truman's lack of control over public information had drastic consequences.
    2. The Democrats were eventually shamed from office.
  - B. A psychological analysis of Truman reveals that:
    1. Truman didn't feel comfortable with his job.
    2. He didn't like the press and was personally insecure.
    3. He oscillated between impetuosity and cocksureness.
    4. He lacked authority and positive civic personality.
- IV. The election of 1948 was perhaps the greatest disaster of the century from the viewpoint of Democrats.
  - A. Dewey was considered a better administrator than Eisenhower.
  - B. The McCarthy phenomena might not have occurred.

## Lecture Six: The Era of Good Feeling: 1953-1963

- I. There are several differences between Eisenhower and Kennedy.
  - A. Eisenhower was a conservative Republican who exercised prudence and conciliatory policies in foreign affairs.
  - B. Kennedy was a young, forward looking Democrat who exercised assertiveness and aggressive policies in foreign affairs.
  - C. However, both muted and dominated political interchange.
- II. Eisenhower's popularity was due to his belief that people wanted to be free from politics. He deliberately showed the public a laid back persona.
- III. The Eisenhower and Truman administrations were different.
  - A. Eisenhower's sense for what leadership is about differed from Truman's belligerence.
  - B. Eisenhower's relations with the press were distanced, but not hostile. He had an air of confidence with them.
  - C. In 1956, the liberals began to find need for presidential attention. However, Eisenhower was reelected by a larger majority.
  - D. Eisenhower had several failures in foreign affairs involving the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, the Suez Canal, the launching of Sputnik and the 1960 U2 incident.
- IV. Kennedy's popularity is based on several factors.
  - A. He played on a sense of fear that the U.S. was falling behind.
  - B. He carried an aggressive mood and built up the armed forces.
  - C. Kennedy's critics say his stance represented manipulation.
  - D. Kennedy answered his critics by saying that "appearances are not only important to politics, but are part of the reality of politics".
- V. Kennedy's assassination had a profound affect on the nation.
  - A. His critics believed that had he lived, he would have been tainted by the Vietnam war as Johnson was.
  - B. His supporters felt he was much less a "cold warrior" than any other politician, and that Vietnam might have been a more positive experience under his leadership.
  - C. Americans felt the tragedy of Kennedy's death, suggesting the power of the Kennedy family.
  - D. From the point of view of the historian, it was the most significant event because it gave the nation solace for the next fifteen years.



## Lecture Seven: Lyndon Johnson and the American Nightmare

- I. Johnson may be congratulated for the domestic policies of the 1960's which are often overshadowed by his political personality.
  - A. Johnson was willing to use his clout to get what he wanted.
  - B. Johnson had a peculiar relation to the Washington establishment.
  - C. Johnson was uncomfortable with his lack of cultural experience and was therefore in awe of his cabinet.
  - D. This made him sensitive to the underdog, the laborers, and the deprived, and committed to the ideals of social justice.
  - E. It was an era where people felt anything was possible.
- II. Johnson's policies were controversial.
  - A. He is hated by those who wanted the U.S. out of Vietnam.
  - B. However, at the time, a majority of the electorate was in favor of the bombing.
  - C. Eventually, people wanted him out of office because of his civic personality.
  - D. Americans are unclear about what they want.
    1. They do not want the realization of a dream but rather a sketch of an ideal world.
    2. If you try to bring them the dream, you get dispute.
    3. Johnson mistakes the ephemera of politics for its essence.
    4. The American people didn't seem to want social justice or the roll back of Communism.
- III. Johnson was an unusual man.
  - A. The media was leery of him which worked to his disadvantage.
  - B. He had a sense of inferiority.
  - C. Johnson had no sense of the role of virtue.
    1. He gave rewards and punishment in material ways.
    2. He had an extraordinary need for the support of the people.
- IV. Johnson dropped out of the 1968 election.
  - A. He was ultimately replaced by Herbert Humphrey.
  - B. Humphrey was the leading advocate of social justice but was betrayed by blacks and liberals and lost to Nixon.
  - C. The election was more about emotions than policy.
  - E. The Democrats were wounded by this election. They had previously been held together by big spending, defense-minded leaders, but the new leaders did not share this philosophy.

## Lecture Eight: Watergate and the Failure of Liberalism

- I. A pre-Watergate history of Nixon:
  - A. Nixon started his political career in California.
  - B. By 1952, he was a prominent man of the center right.
  - C. The Hiss case propelled Nixon to power.
  - D. Liberals hated Nixon. They called him an opportunist.
  - E. Despite this, he had a certain integrity. He was intelligent, hard working, and a capable politician.
  - F. In foreign policy his anti-communism was a rhetorical pose.
  - G. Nixon had an intense hatred for East Coast liberals. He blamed them for social crisis and the Vietnam War.
  - H. Nixon felt a calling to clean up the "liberal mess", so he established a domestic surveillance group dubbed "The Plumbers" who were to plug security leaks and get information on the liberals.
- II. All the details to Watergate are still not known.
  - A. It is not clear who gave the orders.
  - B. Chuck Colson may have heard one of Nixon's rambling dialogues in which Nixon suggested tapping Watergate.
  - D. It became clear that Nixon and many of his aides were involved.
  - F. Nixon succeeded by playing on people's anger.
  - G. His controversial dialogue about the subversion of constitutional government in the U.S. brought about his downfall.
- III. There are parallels between Hiss and Watergate.
  - A. Hiss was guilty of collaboration with the Soviets, symbolizing the evils of a generation. He paid a symbolic price for the Republicans.
  - B. By finding Nixon guilty, the Democrats purged the 1960's evils.
- IV. The collapse of the Republican Administration paradoxically led to the rise of Republicanism.
  - A. The 1968 election fractured the Democratic party over the issues of social welfare and defense orientation.
  - B. McGovern lost the 1972 election by a landslide.
  - C. Watergate stopped the further discredibility of the Democratic left and heightened the convictions of candidates like McGovern.
  - D. It also replaced the Republican split with a rigid right wing.
  - E. There were ironic consequences to Watergate.
    - 1. The Democratic party became too oriented to its left.
    - 2. Watergate benefits the Republican right.

## SUGGESTED READING TO ACCOMPANY

The Good King: The American Presidency Since the Depression

Patterson, James T. America in the Twentieth Century. In my view, the best one volume text available. For this course, begin with the chapter on Herbert Hoover.

Conkin, Paul. The New Deal. An idiosyncratic but persuasive view of politics in the 1930's and of its central figure, FDR.

Smith, Gaddis. American Diplomacy in World War II, 2nd ed. A good survey of international politics in the war as it touched on the United States. Smith's second edition is less hard on FDR than the first.

Reeves, Thomas ed. McCarthyism. This edited collection of sources still presents a very negative view of McCarthy, but there is no positive or "balanced" view.

Miller, Merle. Plain Speaking. The famous oral history of Truman -- his recollection of how it was, often contradicted by others and by existing documents.

Hamby, Alonzo. Liberalism and its Challenges. A moderate survey of the primary theme in recent American history, the rise and fall of the New Deal Order.

Lawson, Steven. Running for Freedom. A good synopsis of the civil rights drama of the 1960's, based on the most recent scholarship.

Hearden, Patrick. Tragedy of Vietnam. One of many synthetic works summarizing the American involvement in Vietnam.

Schell, Jonathan. Time of Illusion. A frightening picture of the Nixon years, fascinating but, even in the perspective of twenty years, hyperbolic.





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